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INSTRUMENTAL INSTRUMENTALISM

MUCH has been written and said of late of the moral depravity of an instrumentalist philosophy. Of what value is a philosophy that is so engrossed in the means, that it gives no thought to the ends? One can not intelligently discuss the instruments of human progress unless one first knows its goals. Instrumentalism when carried to its logical conclusion finds itself involved in a *reductio ad absurdum*, for not everything can be instrumental; something must be final. And what is more, even the instrumental goods of life may have their additional intrinsic values. Instrumentalism is at best merely a partial truth. Such, in general, are the charges which are being brought against instrumentalism.

If these charges are valid, instrumentalism would, it seems to me, be obviously condemned. And if they but indicate the weaknesses in the theory, it would seem to be weak indeed. But I think they serve less to throw light on the difficulties of the instrumentalist position, than to throw light on its difficulties in making itself understood. One naturally becomes suspicious of philosophers who continually get themselves misunderstood. One infers that they do not know how to say what they mean, or that they do not mean what they say, or that they mean different things as occasion requires, or that they mean something radically unintelligible. To what extent the instrumentalists are guilty in these respects, I leave to the reader's own predilections to determine. For my part, I think the chief cause for the misunderstandings involved in the charges listed above is in the term "instrumentalism" itself; and I think if we could forget this "label," and study the writings which bear it directly in terms of their subject-matter, misunderstandings might be fewer. In these days of polemics, let a man but call himself an "instrumentalist," and that of itself is sufficient to start a controversy, regardless of whether either party to the controversy knows what the term means or not. Just because the term instrumentalism, like the terms realism and idealism, may mean most anything, it would seem worthwhile to attempt to define in their own terms the ideas which are concealed by the "ism." I am conscious that I am running the risk

of but adding at least one more meaning to the term, and of thus increasing the confusion. If that be the case, I hope that what follows will be allowed to stand or fall on its own account, whether it be instrumentalism or not. For my purpose is not to add to the controversies about the term instrumentalism; rather I wish to plead that it be discarded, since it appears to be more of an instrument of verbal warfare than of intellectual clarification.

Let me recall first that instrumentalism was originally a theory of judgment. As such it meant the thesis that judgments are instruments by which man enhances his control over his environment. Now a judgment may obviously be any number of other things, and consequently other valid definitions (if I may beg the question!) are possible. This definition claims to be in terms of what a judgment does, its function; and it may hence be called an instrumental definition. But that does not mean that this "instrumentalist" theory of judgment fails to take into account the ends which judgment serves. For the *ends* of judgment are precisely upon what the definition is based. It would be less misleading to call such a theory functional or teleological, rather than instrumental. But more is intended by the instrumentalists. For it must be noted that the thesis that judgments are instrumental is itself a judgment and must consequently be interpreted instrumentally. Most readers of instrumentalist logic assume that to say "judgments are instrumental," means simply that every judgment and every theory or system of judgments is an instrument of control. And the obvious reply is to produce a judgment which serves no such purpose. (Esthetic judgments serve effectively in this capacity!) But to criticize an instrumentalist in this way, assumes that he does not take himself seriously; that he fails to apply his theory to his own judgment. If we ask, accordingly, what is the instrumentalist interpretation of the instrumentalist theory, I think the only possible answer is, that it is a criterion for the evaluation of judgments. It defines a *good* judgment, rather than *any* judgment. The judgment, "All judgments are instrumental," means, if interpreted instrumentally, "All judgments *should be* instrumental." That is to say, a good judgment is one which "gets you somewhere" (intellectually speaking), and a bad judgment is one which is either a "blank cartridge" or a positive obstruction. (I purposely used the terms good and bad, rather than true and false; they have greater instrumental value!) It ought not to be necessary to add that it is not the business of a philosophy of judgment to offer a criterion of good and bad "places to get to." If a judgment gets you *anywhere* it is a good judgment, whether or not it is good for you to get there.

The knowledge of where to get and where not to get is a matter for the science of ethics, and should not be allowed to confuse the theory of judgment.

But a virulent anti-instrumentalist will no doubt congratulate me on so readily giving away the case. If instrumentalists mean nothing more than this, their position is not only true and obvious, but merely a celebration of the commonplace, all the more vicious because it is couched in more pretentious terms. And if, he will say, the instrumentalist would take himself "merely" instrumentally, no one would quarrel with him. However that may be, I am interested here in trying to show that this is not merely an apologetic for the instrumentalist, a statement of what he should have said, but that it really represents his own meaning. For when the instrumentalist develops his theory of judgment into a general philosophy of life, we find this to be the dominating note. It is an insistence on the evaluation of ideas by their consequences. In Dewey's writings in particular this central theme is developed in a number of ways. It is developed as a theory of education and of ethics. It is developed, though fragmentarily, as a philosophy of history. It is developed as a social and political philosophy. But in all these various forms the method is that of approaching ideas (theories and philosophies) from their *function* in human experience. They are considered each in relation to its own environment and evaluated in terms of it. The significance of the method is that it is fundamentally teleological. It is not a philosophy of nature, but of intelligence; and its subject-matter, whatever it may be, is always evaluated in terms of human art, *i.e.*, teleologically. Instrumentalism, in brief, is a method of evaluating ideas by placing them in their teleological relationships.

Now why such a procedure should be called instrumentalism is not clear to me. The term was carried over from the more limited field of logical theory where it was useful, to the broader field of philosophy where it has become confusing. What instrumentalism really amounts to is not a harping on the instrumental values of life to the neglect of the intrinsic values; it is not a philosophy which tries to get along without aims and ends. It is simply the insistence on the importance of teleological relationships. No one more than the instrumentalist realizes the impossibility of divorcing means and end. Means and end are correlatives, and it is impossible to emphasize the one and not the other without getting into fruitless abstractions. And I don't think one would accuse the instrumentalist of committing this blunder, were it not for the name. "Teleologist" would be a more descriptive term, were not that term rendered useless by its ambiguities. Dewey has more recently used the term "experi-

talist" almost exclusively, and it does away with the false implications of "instrumentalist." An experimentalist may be defined as a philosopher who regards ideas as working hypotheses and in that sense "instrumental"; or as one who evaluates ideas by the purposes they serve. The two definitions are correlative.

It seems to me that the real objection to the experimentalist philosophy as we have it, is not that it emphasizes means to the exclusion of ends (for it does not), but that it is merely formal. It insists on the importance of the means-end relationship for philosophy and life, but it has little or nothing to say about means and ends in the concrete. An inquirer who comes to the experimentalist with the question, "What are the ends of human life?" will be disappointed, and he goes away grumbling, "The man is too much concerned with means to know anything about ends." But he would have been equally disappointed had he asked: "What are the means of human life?" The philosopher knows little or nothing about either ends or means in the concrete; he only knows that if you would be intelligent you must keep means and end in mind. In view of other theories of intelligence this insistence may be justified, but it seems to me that the protests indicated above are symptoms of a growing impatience with philosophy for contenting itself with the connotation of "intelligence" and leaving the denotation to tradition, common sense, and occasionally to science. Of course, the philosopher can reply that any philosophy *must* be formal; the philosopher is a lover of wisdom, not a wise man. God alone knows the ends and means of human life. But the experimentalist can ill afford to make such an apology, for who condemned German philosophy for its formalism!

An experimentalist philosophy seems to me bound to admit its belief in its own instrumental value. If it should be final, if it does not stimulate experimental habits of life, it too stands condemned by its own criterion. But if the philosophy of intelligence turn out to be instrumental in the spread of intelligence, then it stands justified, though not only it but all philosophy pass out of existence. Instrumentalism is honor bound to prove its value as an instrument of control. If intelligence gains more of a foothold in human life because a philosophy of "creative intelligence" is being preached, the instrumentalist is instrumentally validated.

Whether or not instrumentalism will thus vindicate itself, it is as yet impossible to tell. I think there can be no doubt that the intellectual stimulation which it has occasioned during the last decade or two has meant a net gain in intelligence. But it is to be doubted whether that gain is due so much to the preaching of instrumental-

ism as a philosophy as to the fresh analysis and the clarification which instrumentalists have given to certain specific problems. Instrumentalism achieved its greatest successes as an instrument of analysis. But to-day there seems to be a general tendency to abandon the task of analysis and to enter upon a campaign of preaching and propaganda. But preaching, as the instrumentalist repeatedly insists, is usually a very ineffective moral and intellectual instrument. Consequently the pulpit ill becomes the instrumentalist. In the realm of education a similar tendency is to be noticed. No one will deny that the philosophy of James and Dewey has made for more intelligence in education. But that result has been achieved by making specific reforms in education, and not by teaching students an instrumentalist philosophy. But to-day there seems to be a tendency to make this philosophy itself the subject-matter of education. It is very much to be doubted whether intelligence is to be achieved by teaching "the philosophy of intelligence." In short, preaching or teaching the "moral obligation to be intelligent" is of little value if it lead merely to an enthusiastic defense of the ethics of intelligence, instead of to the habit of disciplined thinking.

It would indeed be a curious bit of irony if some future German philosopher should write a book on American philosophy and politics, devoting it to the thesis that American philosophers and educators succeeded in making the idea of experimental science and intelligence so formal, yet so powerful, that American politicians were able to supply the "concrete filling-in" *ad libitum*. I write this as a warning, not as a prophecy. If instrumentalism should be guilty of such charges it would be self-condemned. But the philosophy is still in its infancy, and it would be rash to try to predict its future. It is, however, just as rash to try to evaluate instrumentalism, for its outcome is still unknown. To sum up, the point I wish to emphasize about instrumentalism is the same point which Solon made regarding happiness, and which instrumentalism made regarding judgments, *viz.*, "it behooves us to mark well the end" (Herodotus, Bk. I, ch. 32).

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